

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



[The Editor is not responsible for opinions expressed in this Department.]

ONE VIEW OF WHY DESIRABLE PROBATIONERS ARE SCARCE

DEAR EDITOR: I have read with much interest the discussions concerning the shortage of probationers which have been going on in the JOURNAL during the last few months. It seems strange to me that any nurse who had herself gone through training could be surprised at this condition of affairs. Looking back at my training I can conscientiously say that had I a sister, a daughter, or a close friend, who contemplated entering the profession of nursing, I should most emphatically do all in my power to dissuade her from doing so.

Perhaps a short outline of my personal experience will explain my position. The hospital in which I was trained is a large general hospital, one of the first registered in New York state, and it affords an excellent variety of experience. The term of training is three years. The probationary period is two months, but may be extended, even to six months, at the discretion of the chief nurse; and under the clause of refusing to assign a reason for dismissal, the probationer may be dismissed at the end of that time. The work of the probationer is largely of a character which could be much more suitably performed by ward maids who, of course, would cost the hospital money. I remember the long mornings of scrubbing bath-rooms and sinks, carrying heavy breakfast trays into the wards and removing the same, dragging heavy screens which, with just a little extra money could have been made ball bearing, and the lifting, unaided, of heavy patients, all because the number of nurses in a ward were insufficient to spare time to assist each other.

After the probationary period was ended the really *hard* work began. No one who is really interested in nursing objects to work which, although at times almost unbearably trying, is *necessary*, but to the endless things which are made *unnecessarily* hard, and which a little thought or foresight could render so much easier. In our training-school, military discipline was maintained. Upper and lower classes had nothing in common, except where duty demanded it, seniors never speaking to those in the

lower classes. This is very well for the maintainance of rigid discipline, and certainly minimizes the duties of the chief nurse and her assistants, but is it best for the personal welfare of the nurses? Does it not tend to narrow them? It attaches undue importance to a position and condition that are, at best, temporary, and tends, in the end, to induce in many graduates, especially of our larger hospitals, an overbearing and unsympathetic manner very objectionable to private patients.

Our quarters were situated on the fourth floor, at the top of the house, in rooms which were dark and cheerless in the extreme. Four nurses slept in each room and we were obliged to make our own beds, and tidy our rooms. The rooms not being very large, were crowded with so many nurses. There was no incentive to make them cheerful and homelike, there was no privacy, and there was no room set apart for the sick pupil nurse who became ill. Unless her illness was contagious she remained in her room and was attended there, annoyed by her room-mates, and an annoyance to them. The hours of duty were long and uncertain. A nurse, having been on duty all day, would be told to continue on duty and special some operative case, or delirious patient, until midnight; or, having come off duty at seven and retired at ten, she would be called at midnight to special until morning, and would then continue on duty all day as though nothing had happened. This meant two hours' sleep out of twenty-four. The operating-room nurse, also a pupil, has to my knowledge, been called as many as five nights a week for emergency operations, but although she lost sleep for periods varying from two hours to half the night, no provision was made for her to make up the lost sleep on the following day.

During our second and third years in training, we were sent out by the hospital on private duty for which the hospital received sixteen dollars a week, and we received absolutely nothing. Some of the nurses who were well liked on private duty, spent almost all of their second and third years on cases, thereby losing the greater part of their operating room training, (some of them, all of it) and missing numerous lectures which, together with missed classes had to be made up as the nurse could manage it.

Is this fair? Is it conducive to the good of the nurses themselves, or is it a form of graft on the part of the hospital authorities? We were supposed to have one half day a week, and three hours on Sunday, but the slightest faults were sufficient to deprive us of them. Since I have graduated, I have found by inquiries among other nurses that this seems to be a trick of all training-school superintendents. I think it is most injurious, to say nothing of being unfair.

In most training-schools the hours are long enough, being from seven a. m. to seven p. m., and the nurses in our large hospitals frequently never leave the buildings except on their day off. When these are taken from them, they are frequently weeks without out-door exercise, yet the very nature of their occupation renders it necessary that it should be compulsory for at least an hour each day. This depriving nurses of their time, as a disciplinary measure, is very petty, and when applied to women supposedly engaged in an honorable profession, most undignified. Add to this the restrictions, many of them needless, that are placed around nurses and to which no other class of women would be foolish enough to submit. They are usually required to be in by nine-thirty, and they get off duty at seven p. m. Where can you go and get back by nine-thirty? Late leave, although supposed to be obtainable once a month, is doled out as the chief nurse's personal caprices dictate. As a consequence, there are whole months during which nurses never see a play and never get time to attend an opera. Nothing but hospital, hospital, hospital. No wonder work becomes mechanical.

Again, there is the rule, the breaking of which is punished by dismissal in many of our hospitals, that a nurse shall not speak to a doctor, yet no business man would dare to impose such a rule touching the intercourse of his stenographer with the clerks in his office, and I wager the discipline of said office does not suffer thereby. If this rule is not made in the interests of discipline, for what is it made? Surely you, superintendents, who uphold it, do not doubt the character of your nurses to such an extent that you do not trust them. In the New York Post-graduate school, where the nurses have a splendid home, no such rule is in force and in consequence members of the staff take little interest in each other, other than professional. It is prohibition which makes those things desirable. The same is true of the New York Lying-in and of several others, none of which have suffered by the omission of this ridiculous rule.

There seems to be proportionately little interest in the care of the pupil nurse from the physical standpoint. As Dr. Potter said, in her admirable paper on Venereal Prophylaxis, practically nothing is taught nurses concerning the great danger of infection from this ever present cause, and many are afflicted for life in consequence. Add to this the amount of tuberculosis in every general hospital, to say nothing of typhoid, and when, to these great disease centers, you bring women worn by long hours of duty and insufficient rest, and badly nourished, (because appetites succumb to the two foregoing conditions) and it need create no surprise that the constantly increasing cry of the newly gradu-

ated is, "Oh! .I must rest up a while before I begin to take cases, *I am all worn out.*"

Just at present the question of going back to the two years system of training is being agitated. If the hospitals had kept their word when the three year system was inaugurated; if they had increased the number of nurses, and had a large number of ward maids and orderlies; if they had created an eight hour system, and made the nurse's third year an educational advantage to her, I should say unhesitatingly that it would be a backward step to return to the two years course. As it is now, with the long hours of routine work, and little more than ordinary educational advantage in the third year, I can not see that, with the exception of a few progressive institutions which have really striven to better the conditions of the nurses, it is of any especial advantage to any but the hospital, which is thereby relieved from the necessity of paying salaries to graduates to hold its positions of operating-nurses, head-nurses, and night superintendents, those positions being filled by the senior pupil nurses.

I do not wish it to be understood from this discussion of the matter, that I think all superintendents and chief nurses, are narrow, selfish and prejudiced—far from it. Some of the finest, most broad-minded women I have ever met were hospital superintendents and chief nurses, women whose end and aim in life was the betterment of the conditions in their own training-schools, and the uplifting of the profession in general; but I *do* say, that there are an unfortunately large number who continue to regard the training-school as a reformatory, and the inmates as in need of discipline, and this view is *not* conducive to the betterment of the profession as a whole, nor will it tend to attract to that profession those women who, from a moral, social, and educational standpoint, are most desirable, if nursing, as a profession, is to attain to that standard of worth and excellence which its illustrious founders intended, and which many noble and disinterested women are still laboring and hoping to achieve.

CHRISTINE R. RUSSELL, R. N.,

COLON HOSPITAL, CANAL ZONE, PANAMA.

THE QUESTION OF RANK

DEAR EDITOR: In several numbers of THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF NURSING letters have been written in regard to giving the nurses title or standing in the army; and some time ago some one used the term "intolerable conditions now existing in the army." Being a Spanish American war nurse, and also having served in the Philippine Islands, I would like to say a few words on the subject. What kind of standing